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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a research project to identify school program criteria producing the highest teacher stress levels for three new middle schools. The middle-school environment embodies specific concepts endemic to educating adolescents. The new middle schools opened with teachers who were unfamiliar with both middle-school concepts and with each other. The research was completed at the end of the first full year of middle-school operation and addressed both personal and professional stress indicators. A survey based on a Likert forced-choice method was developed and administered to every middle-school teacher in the three new schools. Results indicated that teachers were most stressed by three concerns: increased length of the school day, competition generated among students and teachers, and overall lack of communication. Results were compared with teacher and school demographic factors for quantitative analysis, but no significant factors were determined. Findings were useful in reducing teacher stress levels for the upcoming school year. Three tables summarizing each school's stress indicators are appended. (8 references) (Author/MLH)

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STRESS FACTORS OF

MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHERS

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A paper prepared for presentation at the annual meeting of the **Mid-South Educational Research Association** in New Orleans, LA, November 14-16, 1990.

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> Teachers' lives are shaped not only by their peculiar status as "professional adults" and purveyors of justice but also by the special quality of their work--a work that cannot be reduced to rules, competencies, techniques, or attitudes.
>
> --Sara Lawrence Lightfoot, 1983

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research project was to identify the criteria within the middle school program that produced the highest level of teacher stress for three new middle schools. The middle school environment has specific concepts that are endemic to this approach for educating adolescents. The new middle schools opened with teachers who were unfamiliar, not only with the middle school concept, but also with each other. The research was completed at the end of the first full year of the middle schools and addressed both personal and professional stress indicators.

A survey was developed by the researchers and administered to every middle school teacher in the three new schools. The survey utilized a Likert forced-choice method for obtaining the data. Results indicated that teachers were most stressed by three concerns: the increased length of the school day, the

competition generated among the students and the teachers, and the over-all lack of communication. The results were compared to teacher and school demographic factors for quantitative analysis, but no significant factors were determined. The results of the research were useful in reducing teacher stress levels for the upcoming school year.

INTRODUCTION

Stress has become a problem to people of all walks of life. Stress affects the actions of the individual on a professional and a personal level. The physical, mental, and emotional well-being of each individual is influenced by the amount of stress he/she perceives in a given situation. Stress, therefore, is a somewhat subjective concept, depending on how each person perceives the situation encountered. However subjective stress may be, it would be difficult to find a person who would say he/she had never experienced stress.

Stress has become a household word, but what is it? Among the myriad of definitions in print, that advanced by Dudley and Welke (1977) is classic: stress is "an adaptive response in which your body prepares, or adjusts, to a threatening situation." How does it affect teachers? How do teachers recognize stress in their life? Stress has many meanings, but most people think of stress as the demands of life. Technically, these demands are called "stressors," and the actual wear and

tear on the body is the stress. Brimm (1982) stated that "stress may be viewed as any action or situation that places physical or psychological demands on people" (p. 29). The demands or challenges of life can come from people and events around the teacher, as well as from their inner thoughts and struggles. When these demands increase, teachers often perceive that they are under excessive stress. Further, stress is integrally related to control: the greater one's sense of powerlessness over the stressor, the greater the stress. Although stress is typically viewed in a negative manner, it must be recognized that a certain amount of stress is necessary for teachers to achieve and perform to their highest abilities. Teachers would be bored if they were forced to spend their days sitting in an easy chair. However, they also do not want to live in an overly stressful world, but need ways to live with stressful situations and find enjoyment in meeting and mastering the challenges of their rapidly changing world. Negative stress, or distress, is felt when a teacher perceives the demands as being beyond his or her coping abilities. Brimm (1982) noted that "feelings of insecurity, helplessness, or desperation are associated with negative stress" (p. 30).

Stress is a necessary and unavoidable concomitant of daily living--necessary because without some stress teachers would be listless and apathetic creatures, and unavoidable because it relates to any external event, be it pleasurable or anxiety-producing. Anxiety leads to tension, a physical reaction often exhibited in

nervous impulses which cause changes in the body. When tension reaches a degree of intensity that has an adverse effect on the body, the result is stress. Stress can cause a wide variety of physical problems, often debilitating and frequently damaging to work performance. Severe stress has been correlated with coronary disease, respiratory problems, backaches, high blood pressure, and other psychosomatic illnesses, to the extent that for most people stress is a loaded term which connotes unhealthy or harmful conditions, i.e., a disease or illness. Since each individual perceives situations and demands from their own point of view and is constantly being influenced by a variety of factors, because any measure of stress-causing indicators is dependent on the individual's perception of his/her coping mechanisms at that time. In truth, however, stress can also motivate and invigorate and enable people to achieve far more than they thought themselves capable of doing. In general most stressors are in themselves neutral and do not necessarily produce distressful reactions. Adverse physical and emotional consequences are usually the result of the way an individual perceives particular events or conditions. Because one's perception of a "threatening situation" is often highly subjective, stress itself is a highly subjective phenomenon, it is truly "all in the mind" of the individual. Consequently, intellectual awareness of and proper emotional attitudes toward stress are critical for teachers.

EDUCATORS

In the field of education, teachers and administrators often report a high level of stress, sometimes referred to as burnout. Burnout is a distinctive kind of job-related stress that inhibits the person's capacity to function effectively because the body's resources for resisting stress have become exhausted. Research indicates that individuals engaged in the helping professions or human services are particularly susceptible to burnout. Burnout is not just a temporary indisposition, but an unhealthy condition that makes once idealistic, productive, enthusiastic principals detriments to their profession, their colleagues, their faculties, their students, and themselves. Strangely enough, burnout usually affects the most capable teachers--those who are the most competent and committed, those who feel the most strongly about the value of what they do and want to do their best. School districts are now paying increased attention to burnout because it diminishes the effective services of the very best teachers

The stressful situations faced by teachers are as varied as the individual. According to research there are two sources of stress, one self-imposed and the other situational. Self-imposed stress comes not from over work but from unrealistic expectations. Situational stress results from the demands of others, the conflict among people; the clash of values. However, teachers are encountering more problems today than ever before. For example, they must deal with student apathy, drug and alcohol abuse, pregnancy, high dropout rates, educational

reforms, itinerant students, and dysfunctional families, to name but a few. Coping with the problems of students in addition to one's own problems may be a burden too heavy to bare. Add to these problems the everyday responsibilities of educating students and providing an effective learning environment, and it becomes obvious that teachers have to be capable of coping with a great deal of stress.

Much has been written about teacher stress, but the real crux of the problem is that most teachers have learned how to teach by teaching. Most have learned what they know in isolation from peers; as a result, they cling tightly to what they know. Ideas, projects, packages, materials, processes, mandates, problems, new subject areas, and research translations all offer the potential for teacher stress. Different schools, depending on their social context and the talents and abilities of the teachers, deal with their dilemmas in various ways. The major task of the school is to find a way for teachers to become involved in their definition of the problem, and their viewpoint in the solution. Changing a routine that has been learned and practiced over the years is incredibly complicated, even more so because teaching is an isolated activity.

INTERPERSONAL RELATIONS

Perhaps the most ignored area of observation about teacher stress is the one most obvious to teachers--the interpersonal relations in the school. These

relations are difficult to analyze because they are so ubiquitous, but they may be the most important determinants of teacher feelings about self, about work, about peers, and about the school. In a large-scale study, teacher stress was very affected by the behavior and activities of the principal (Lieberman, 1969). There is no doubt that the morale and the teachers' sense of professionalism has a great deal to do with the principal's treatment of the faculty, both individually and collectively.

Stress can also result from interaction with other teachers. Research has indicated that teaching suffers from a lack of technical language (Lortie, 1975), which can create difficulty and stress for teachers. Teachers also form their personal and professional repertoire by immediacy and pragmatic responses to daily demands. Consequently, even when teachers are doing a spectacular job, they are hard pressed to accurately describe the complexity of the teaching act. The tendency is to describe teaching activities, events, interactions, incidents, hearsay, and gossip.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRESS

A certain amount of stress in the workplace is unavoidable and even desirable: high standards motivate teachers to do their best. But stress also results when, for example, the heating and ventilating system does not work properly, when teachers are not appropriately involved in decision-making, and

when there are conflicting expectations for what teachers are to do. Most of the attention to stress reduction in schools appropriately focuses on the work environment of teachers. Betsy Schlansker's (1987) research indicates "that as many as 25 percent of K-12 teachers may be experiencing a damaging degree of burnout." In her survey of teachers, five of the ten most stressful events for teachers were **management tensions:** *"notification of unsatisfactory performance; involuntary transfer; denial of promotion or advancement; overcrowded classrooms; and disagreements with supervisors."* Frey and Young list several symptoms of teacher burnout: *"apathy, fatigue, tension, frustration, boredom, irritability, detachment, rigidity, demoralization, hopelessness, and a sense of not being appreciated."*

Raymond Calabrese (1987) polled a sample of teachers to elicit which of their stress factors were most under the control of the principal. The teachers identified four areas: *"elimination of ambiguous policies; increase in visible support; improved communications and directions; and increased positive feedback,"* three of which are directly related to the communication skills of the principal.

METHODOLOGY

Three new middle schools were opened within the same Kentucky county during the 1989-90 school year. Since they were new, the faculties were new to

the middle school concept and new to each other. The researchers developed a thirty-five item, forced-choice survey for identifying stressful events for these new middle school teachers. A five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ***no stress*** to 5 ***extreme stress*** was used to categorize the responses. All the teachers in all three school responded to the survey. The SPSS statistical package was used to analyze the data.

FINDINGS

The findings are reported for each of the three schools in Tables I, II and III. In School A the top five stress events were: *intra-school communication*, 3.542; *constructing interdisciplinary units*, 3.333; *classroom paperwork*, 3.042; *extra-curricular activities*, 3.000; and, *conducting interdisciplinary units*, 2.917. Two of these stressors are directly related to communication, while two others involve the essence of the middle school concept.

In School B the top five stress events were: *school day length*, 4.545; *length of school day*, 4.545; *exploratory content*, 2.955; *constructing interdisciplinary units*, 2.864; and, *classroom paperwork*, 2.773. Obviously, the most stressful event in this school is the length of the school day. The other events relate to the middle school concept and paperwork.

In School C the top five stress events were: *school day length*, 3.826; *length of school day*, 3.739; *classroom paperwork*, 3.217; *intra-school*

communication, 3.174; and, *exploratory content*, 3.130. Again, the most obvious stressor is the length of school day. Two other stressors relate to communication and the other to the middle school concept.

CONCLUSION

The most obvious conclusion is that teachers in these three middle schools are stressed by three distinct concepts; communication, or lack thereof; the length of the school day; and, the middle school concept. Since none of the teachers had previous experience in middle schools, the stress felt in dealing with a new concept is understandable. However, the other two areas should be addressed by the administrators as they prepare for the second year of these middle schools.

TABLE I

SCHOOL A MEAN STRESS INDICATORS

EVENT		MEAN (N=24)
1.	Assemblies	1.542
2.	Classroom paperwork	3.042
3.	Competition between schools	1.750
4.	Community/PTO/PTA meetings	2.000
5.	Conducting interdisciplinary units	2.917
6.	Constructing interdisciplinary units	3.333
7.	Custodial services	1.292
8.	Counseling services	1.583
9.	Exploratory content	2.750
10.	Exploratory finances	2.542
11.	Exploratory grading	2.292
12.	Extra-curricular activities	3.000
13.	Faculty meetings	1.458
14.	Field trips	1.875
15.	Flexible library scheduling	2.042
16.	Flexible team scheduling	1.750
17.	Intra-school communication	3.542
18.	Length of school day	1.500
19.	Lesson preparation	2.042
20.	Lunchroom program	2.667
21.	Parent conferences as a team	1.917
22.	Pupil/teacher ratio	1.875
23.	School/community communication	2.083
24.	School day length	1.500
25.	Sports activities	2.167
26.	Student placement	2.083
27.	Team building activities	2.125
28.	Team level paperwork	2.583
29.	Team meetings	1.875
30.	Testing	2.000
31.	Working as an entire faculty	1.958
32.	Working with administration	2.542
33.	Working with other teams	1.833
34.	Working with related arts	1.625
35.	Working with team members	1.292

TABLE II

SCHOOL B MEAN STRESS INDICATORS

EVENT		MEAN (N=22)
1.	Assemblies	1.545
2.	Classroom paperwork	2.773
3.	Competition between schools	2.364
4.	Community/PTO/PTA meetings	2.409
5.	Conducting interdisciplinary units	2.636
6.	Constructing interdisciplinary units	2.864
7.	Custodial services	1.136
8.	Counseling services	1.182
9.	Exploratory content	2.955
10.	Exploratory finances	2.636
11.	Exploratory grading	2.045
12.	Extra-curricular activities	2.591
13.	Faculty meetings	1.409
14.	Field trips	2.227
15.	Flexible library scheduling	1.364
16.	Flexible team scheduling	1.591
17.	Intra-school communication	1.545
18.	Length of school day	4.545
19.	Lesson preparation	2.364
20.	Lunchroom program	1.318
21.	Parent conferences as a team	2.091
22.	Pupil/teacher ratio	2.409
23.	School/community communication	2.318
24.	School day length	4.545
25.	Sports activities	2.227
26.	Student placement	2.273
27.	Team building activities	1.682
28.	Team level paperwork	2.045
29.	Team meetings	1.818
30.	Testing	2.364
31.	Working as an entire faculty	1.636
32.	Working with administration	1.818
33.	Working with other teams	1.682
34.	Working with related arts	1.545
35.	Working with team members	1.364

TABLE III

SCHOOL C MEAN STRESS INDICATORS

EVENT		MEAN (N=23)
1.	Assemblies	2.261
2.	Classroom paperwork	3.217
3.	Competition between schools	1.913
4.	Community/PTO/PTA meetings	1.217
5.	Conducting interdisciplinary units	2.478
6.	Constructing interdisciplinary units	2.435
7.	Custodial services	1.304
8.	Counseling services	1.217
9.	Exploratory content	3.130
10.	Exploratory finances	2.348
11.	Exploratory grading	2.783
12.	Extra-curricular activities	3.043
13.	Faculty meetings	2.217
14.	Field trips	1.913
15.	Flexible library scheduling	1.652
16.	Flexible team scheduling	1.609
17.	Intra-school communication	3.174
18.	Length of school day	3.739
19.	Lesson preparation	2.348
20.	Lunchroom program	2.870
21.	Parent conferences as a team	1.957
22.	Pupil/teacher/ ratio	2.609
23.	School/community communication	2.348
24.	School day length	3.826
25.	Sports activities	2.522
26.	Student placement	2.870
27.	Team building activities	2.522
28.	Team level paperwork	2.826
29.	Team meetings	1.826
30.	Testing	2.304
31.	Working as an entire faculty	3.130
32.	Working with administration	2.739
33.	Working with other teams	3.087
34.	Working with related arts	1.913
35.	Working with team members	1.261

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